DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 249 EA 030 568

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TITLE Sustainability Predictions for Charter Schools in the New Millennium: A Pennsylvania Focus.

PUB DATE 2000-04-00

NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, Louisiana, April 24-28, 2000).

PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; Business; *Charter Schools; *Educational Change; *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Financial Support; Privatization; Public Schools; *State Aid; State Legislation; State Regulation

IDENTIFIERS *Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

The public view of charter schools and their proposed mission will have a major impact on how well this school reform effort will be sustained. Support for charter schools in Pennsylvania has grown to such an extent that it may prevent demand for voucher systems. Parents dissatisfied with public schools elected to transfer their children to charter schools hoping that smaller settings, more caring staff, and individualized instruction would improve student achievement and ensure future economic stability. Other parents saw charter schools helping students in special education, English as a second language, and at-risk populations. Another reason for abandoning regular public schools is violence in schools; these parents are demanding standards on student conduct. This study contains pros and cons of the movement and is based on interviews with members of charter-school constituencies, school district personnel, educators involved in advising both entities, observations of charter-school implementation, and a review of how legislation is interpreted by all concerned parties, including Pennsylvania Department of Education staffers. (Contains 24 references.) (DFR)

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SUSTAINABILITY PREDICTIONS FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE NEW MILLENIUM; A PENNSYLVANIA FOCUS

It has been two and a half years since Charter Schools were legislated in Pennsylvania, a state touted as having one of the stronger charter laws nationally. Initially, the law was reviewed in comparison to other states recognized for supportive legislation. It was determined that while Pennsylvania could pride itself on some commendatory points such as allowance of unlimited charter sites, educator and non-educator group applications, legal and fiscal autonomy, equitable percentages of professional staffing, fair considerations for teacher transfer-returns, and transitional funding for school districts granting charters, significant issues existed that needed to be addressed.

Most notable of these issues constituted an appeals process that would not come into existence for a two year period, a short-lived transitional funding program for districts granting charters, lack of support for a viable technical assistance program especially in areas of academic and fiscal accountability, non-mandated transportation and sub-contracting services, in addition to insufficient funding timelines and special education observance regulations. Therefore predicted problematic areas in charter school implementation had its roots in legislative language.

Legislation aside, it appears that the public view of charter schools and their proposed mission will have a major impact on how well this school reform effort will be sustained. Many people in Pennsylvania who support charter schools do so to prevent a wide-spread voucher system. Parents, dissatisfied with public education and its ineffectiveness, elect to transfer their children to charters in the hope that a smaller setting, a more caring staff, and individualized instruction will enhance student achievement and assure future economic stability. Some parents have looked toward charter schools as

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being able to better meet the needs of those students in special education, English as a second language programs, and those designated as focused on assisting "at-risk" populations (Geske et al., 1997). Other parents claim that more recent reports of violence in schools represents another reason for abandoning regular public schools; parents are demanding standards on student conduct to prevent antisocial and violent behavior (Ebeling, 3/00). The account provided in this conceptual article is based on interviews with members of charter school constituencies, school district personnel, educators involved in advising both entities, observations of charter school implementation, and a review of how legislation is interpreted by all concerned parties including Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) staffers.

THE MEDIA REPORTS

Generally, many newspaper accounts and media reports covering the progress of charter schools are viewed as being somewhat objective in citing the arguments from both school district and charter school perspectives. However general this statement may be, there are always many small communities wherein the press is more politically based and may promote one entity more so than the other. It would be remiss to not cite the influence of media reports on public opinion. The following example demonstrates the value some communities place on news accounts.

On December 31st, 1999, the ***Centre Daily Times*** in the State College area of Pennsylvania (PA) "listed charter schools as one of the 10 biggest news stories or events that occurred in Centre County" (Grignano, 2/2000). The article reads...charter schools are "on the move". Grignano reports that:

> [f]or its size, State College has a relatively large number of public charters. The local district approved two (Nittany Valley and Learning Community) in 1998, and the State Charter School Appeal Board approved a third school *Wonderland) last year over the objections of the district. A fourth charter is in the planning stages.

More notable is the fact that the ***Times*** viewed the existence of charters as a significant movement in education and "used the facts to conclude that the movement has the potential for even greater community impact in the years to come" (Grignano, 2000). However in a small town environment, talk among the county folks regarding recent developments of any type of news is "cause" for consideration and debate. Evidently most town folks understood parental concerns desiring smaller classes, more innovative educational programs, higher educational standards and accountability and mandated parental involvement. Most significant in this example is the development of charter schools in an area where public education is doing well and certainly not dysfunctional. This indicates that parents and educators in this community are pursuing a different path to providing better educated, more informed student graduates. "Charters are emerging to challenge the status quo"(Grignano, 2/2000).

In addition, Christie Whitman, Governor of the neighbor state of New Jersey, wrote an article for the Philadelphia Tribune, an African-American press, exalting the first charter schools in that state. She noted that New Jersey charter schools are working; as of January 2000, there were 47 charters and 9,000 students in attendance. Whitman cited her belief that "charter schools aren't just making a difference in the lives of those they serve – they are inspiring excellence in education all around the state" (Tribune, 1/14/00, 6-A). She further stated that charters were acting as catalyst for improving traditional public schools.

News reports in urban centers likewise provide accounts of community interest and involvement in the charter school movement. Parents in the ***West Oak Lane Charter School*** in Philadelphia have joined with those from nearby public, parochial, and private schools to form a ***Parents Institute*** that focuses on "addressing issues of concern to local classrooms" (Edmonds, 12/17/99,1-B). These parents have organized lobbying efforts in the Harrisburg capitol and in Philadelphia, held informational workshops monthly, and featured speakers to discuss ways to creatively discipline students who may

disrupt classrooms. Chief administrative officers (CAO's) Gail Hawkins-Bush (Alliance for Progress Charter School) and John Shief (Harambee Public Charter School) remain actively engaged in providing guidance to the Parent Institute and especially to parents at new charter sites that experience "growing pains".

Local papers periodically give an update on the progress of charter schools in Philadelphia and in neighboring areas. One such article highlighted ***The Philadelphia Community Academy***, a private conversion school, that has been "successfully turning dropouts into graduates" prior to its becoming a charter since 1980 (Inquirer, 10/4/99,R1). In 1997, principal Joseph Proietta notes that without charter status, the school could not have accomplished its goals of supporting student achievement, obtaining more computers, hiring a mathematics/music teacher, or refurbishing its building site. Both he and vice principal David Hardy cite the hard work involved in maintaining a successful school; this translates primarily into the overwhelming paperwork and fund-raising events in which they engage. ***Philadelphia Community Academy*** serves 277 students in grades 6 to 12 with a waiting list of 100. This school features a day care center, health clinic, and social worker to assist students in coping with the social ills that hinder their success in a traditional educational setting. Upper level students take French and computer literacy; observance of regulations and uniforms are the accepted norm. Student achievement is visible in the number of honor pins awarded for outstanding academic achievement displayed on students' uniforms; students wear these medallions with pride. The atmosphere of the school is business-like; on visiting, one gains a sense of goal-emphasis, care, and an outward display of student self-esteem.

The current status of Pennsylvania charters boast a total of 51 approved schools statewide, with 48 in operation. The focus of these schools range from technological communications to scientific investigation to alternative education to autistic schooling. Of interest is the fact that special education

focused charters and special education student enrollment in regular education charters are representative of a significant portion of approved charter schools. Schools that are tending to evolve among singular racial populations is a development which necessitates monitoring since the adoption of this reform agenda could result in more segregated schools based on a legislated rationale.

The main strength of charter school constituents lie in their vision of an educational setting which addresses the instructional and emotional needs of their students. The caring factor so often fervently cited by Nel Noddings(1992) takes center stage with these proponents. It is definitely steps away from the bureaucratic, factory-type institution that most public education settings have developed into during the last sixty odd years. The former delineated discussion invites questions of the viability of charter schools as a sustaining form of education throughout the new millenium. We ponder whether its introduction into the public organizational milieu will represent a turning tide in public education and eventually replace current organizational notions of public schooling in the future. This educational reform, still in its infancy, makes it difficult to adequately address these questions however the passion which with the movement is beginning argues for a strong approach to longevity.

The remainder of this article will address current pro's and con's regarding charter schools, their overall progress in general, and issues which have evolved since its enactment in Pennsylvania. Another section will examine recommendations for solving recent problems including an account of an exemplary approach to charter school education. Finally, an overview of those factors endorsing charter school sustainability as a viable school reform effort will be offered.

CURRENT PRO'S AND CON'S OF PENNSYLVANIA'S CHARTER MOVEMENT

One of the most promising features of this reform effort resides in the freedom to develop innovative pedagogical practices. Corwin (1995), in an initial study of charter schools, determined that

"in states that grant charter schools greater autonomy, more money is spent on instruction, teachers feel more freedom to teach in innovative ways, and there is greater parental involvement" (in Goldhaber, 12/99, p. 19).

At a recent charter school conference, June Hairston-Brown (4/2000) noted that the types of change which can be accomplished in charter schools usually takes years to achieve in public school bureaucracies. This factor provides the basis for competition with regular public schools since teachers interested in pedagogical experimentation and parents inclined toward exposing their children to different methodologies are prone to support charter school development. However public schools tied into strict bureaucratic hierarchical structures view this specific element as a threat to their continued existence. Many public school educators believe that charters, with economically upward bound parent/student populations, will decrease enrollment of higher student achievers thus leaving economically disadvantaged and lower achievers in the regular public school realm (McQueen, 2/15/00). Although this situation may lead current public school educators to engage in attempts to upgrade the quality of instruction through meaningful pedagogy, their efforts may be thwarted by the restrictions of both the organizational hierarchy and the environmental setting in which they reside.

In addition, charter school organizational patterns offer the opportunity to actualize the dreams and desires of committed educators. For example, inviting non-educators into classrooms to present a realistic depiction of the needs of the labor market, both current and anticipated, gives students a clearer understanding of the importance of being well educated in gaining the type of skills essential to become economically sound, contributing citizens to our society. The philosophy of training youth to become "contributors" to the maintenance of a democratic society through representative communal sharing reverts to Dewey's conceptual focus (1916). He believed it was not only the job of professional

educators to prepare our youth for productive citizenship, but the undertaking of the entire community as well.

CHARTER SCHOOL SUSTENANCE

Charter school organization opens the possibility of redesigning administrative-faculty or employer-employee operational procedures and processes. Such is the case in the nation's first charter school, the ***Learning Center School*** in St. Paul, Minnesota where a different type of compensation package has been introduced; teachers are rewarded for their accomplishments. Where teacher merit pay plans have not been especially successful in the regular public education sector, compensation tied to competencies essential for school success i.e., teaching ability and mentorship represent an acceptable program at the "Learning Center School". Teachers are able to negotiate their own specific compensation plan that acts as a strong point of accountability. Brian Hassel (4/2000) views this redesign process as representative of "ground breaking in public education".

Another major factor that argues for more charter school development is the direct involvement and engagement of the community, both external and internal. Most charters mandate parental involvement in terms of service hours in some capacity which serves the needs of the school and its students. These services may range from hall duty, office assistance, lobbying, grant-writing, informal student counseling, classroom, cafeteria, and computer assistants to any other identified school needs within the capacity of parent knowledge and abilities. For many parents, serving on the governance board of a charter school and active involvement in charter school activities becomes the focus of their participation.

In the nearby community, businessmen are approached to enlist their belief in the charter as an innovative educational venture and lend their assistance, both financially and otherwise. Their participation has enabled charters to become more knowledgeable regarding fiscal practices, school

governance, approaches to legalities, and human resource selection processes to name a few. Many charters have moved beyond their immediate communities to seek a wider area of business and corporate assistance. Since the concept of successful business management thrives on competition, many corporations are coming forth to aid in this school reform campaign. In reporting on charter school development nationally, Hassel (2000) notes that investors are providing facilities funding by offering loans at reasonable rates and devising one set of deals especially targeted for all charters within a specific regional area. Each year, more investors are becoming involved in this manner thus indicative of valuing this initiative. Several investors are doubling the amounts contributed to charters, a move that signals their belief in charter sustainability.

An example of this external support can be viewed in one charter school site in Philadelphia. The ***World Communications Charter School***, one of the first to be approved statewide in 1997, boasts a variety of programs, each of which leads to "internships in the areas of communications, graphic arts, transportation and video production. Successful students may become candidates for entry-level positions" (Friedman, 10/99). Some students are gaining experiences in operating web-based businesses through TeenTech, an entrepreneurial enterprise housed at the World Communications Charter site. Among the companies assisting in these programs are ALEMAR, a consulting firm that offers technology planning, project management and professional development services to educational institutions. Martin Friedman, company CEO and Director of Instructional Resources for the College of Liberal Arts at Temple University, has enabled charter schools to receive essential funding for technology initiatives. Partnerships have also been formed with the local Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Company (SEPTA) who offer training in Microsoft Office products and development of student communication and interpersonal skills, and with Gress Graphics who assist student development of skills in graphic arts and printing (Friedman, 10/99).

Other entities in the broader community are also supporting the growth of charters; these constitute university affiliations, for-profit organizations, and non-profits. In State College, Pennsylvania, two education professors are involved in the development of charters. Dr. Kyle Peck is Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of the ***Computer Learning Center Charter School***, in its second successful year of operation, touts a vibrant environment supporting student problem-solving and creativity in mastering technology skills. Another charter in the process of being approved, ***Sugar Hill***, will be headed by Dr. T. Daniel Marshall. Several other Penn State faculty members are examining future possible charter involvement. Other university involvement constitutes Duquesne's School of Education introduction of graduate training in "program evaluation", an important component of charter school implementation.

The for-profit educational organizations in reality represent a form of venture capitalism some of which had entered the educational realm prior to the initiation of charters but are now viewing them as new venues. Edison has just been approved to deliver services to four new charters in the Baltimore, Maryland area. Mosaica Academies is the for-profit organization that services a rapidly growing charter school (***Mosaica Academy***) in Bensalem, Pennsylvania. Indications of good student performance, innovative practices, a safe and caring environment has led to the holding of lotteries for student entrance and long waiting lists. Mosaica's value lies in its ability to assist charters especially in sound management skills and community involvement and support (Shafer, 5/99).

Assistance from non-profits in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania are being provided by ***The Charter Schools Project*** sponsored by the Duquesne University's School of Education, and ***Information Renaissance,*** an area technology consulting firm. The latter firm assists in "conduct[ing] 'technology readiness' assessments of the city's four charters" (Grignano, 10/99) which in turn helps schools expand use of technology in the areas of curriculum and administrative management. Grignano also reported

that the ***Charter Schools Project*** 'sponsored scholarships for charter schools to participate in the educational programs offered by ***Pittsburgh Voyager***, a non-profit river-based science and math learning center.

Although some private sector conversions were approved initially by school districts, more resistance is becoming apparent in recent similar applications. Some private schools have examined the components of the charter reform and determined its value to their own programs. One such school that is continuing to experience student performance success and parental approval is the 1998 conversion of the ***Nittany Valley Charter School***. The CAO, Molly Kunkel, has been commended for a well organized, smoothly operated organization. Currently, Pennsylvania has several virtual charter schools, a concept that is even more challenging than on-site institutions and one to be investigated for its success in the future .

In addition, nationwide, many small schools districts (especially those in California) are beginning to convert totally to charter status. This movement is encouraging because it is an outward statement that administrators, teachers, parents, and students are seeking a different, freer educational environment. And not to the surprise of the public, one civil rights promoter, Rosa Parks, opened two charter schools in Detroit, a city district which had only approved two of twelve charter proposals since 1993 (National, 6/30/97). ***The Raymond and Rosa Parks Academy for Self Improvement*** "teaches children quiet strength and self-paced study" (National, 6/97).

DETRACTORS TO THE CAUSE

A few years into this reform effort has resulted in a gradual growth and acceptance of the charter school concept. However, many forces exist which act as inhibitors to this reform's success. In Pennsylvania, it consists of the need for changes in the legislation and for fairer and consistent

interpretation of the wording of the legislation especially by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and PA school districts. Although the Pennsylvania General Assembly has passed the first two amendments* to the state's charter law, more areas need to be examined for their impact on the viability of charters and the adversarial relations it sets in motion between charters and school districts. The two legislative changes allowed charter schools to limit admission to "a targeted population group composed of at-risk students". This change decreased district use of charters as a "dumping ground" for problem students who were permanently dismissed from district public schools. This amendment is on the books but is yet to be enforced throughout the Commonwealth since some charter CAO's continue to cite problems in this area. In addition, the General Assembly resolved a two-year dispute that required the Philadelphia district to provide transportation to charter students in keeping with the Act 372 legislation.

For every possible event in the organizational pattern, legalities, curriculae, and school district-charter relationships, there are numerous situations that prove to be adversarial. As previously stated, most of these concern parts of the PA legislation and their interpretation by various bodies. In Pennsylvania, it appears that the interpretation of the legislation is such that it protects school districts to the detriment of charter schools (Boldt, 2/2000). Some observers view the legislation and its interpretation as being promulgated to insure charter school failure thereby giving the official appearance of support yet mandating elements designed for its non-success. The latter means that the concept of a voucher system, unable to garner sufficient support for approval in the General Assembly, may become more appealing as a future viable educational reform to assist disadvantaged students in obtaining a quality education.

The most glaring problem resulting from the current legislation is that of the flow of revenue from the local school district to the associated charter school. This was noted as a major problem in the initial examination of PA's charter legislation, however there has been no corrective action (Johnson,

1998). Charter school fiscal problems occur when revenue is not available for school opening, nor for timely invoice payments and staff payroll. In Pennsylvania, revenue from the state arrives late in the year therefore regular public school systems have always had to plan their budgets unknowingly but in anticipation of receipts; in addition resources have been compiled over the years and are available to "tide them over" until the money does arrive. Charter schools do not possess such a "pillow" and therefore experience severe financial hardships during these times. In many other states, charter schools are funded directly by the state. This method of operation appears logical but it is customary in these states to place a cap on the number of charters approved, a procedure which acts to create a balance in state disbursement of funds.

Charter schools take issue with school district "holding" of funds; they maintain that charters should have access to those funds and receive the same amount of interest that the district acquires during that time period. It is also being reported that some districts refuse to forward student special education records to charter schools and are keeping that funding in district funds. Most charter schools do not possess sufficient funds for legal assistance to provide help in operating according to all mandated legalities in addition to pursuing problems resulting from unfair school district practices. Funding charter schools to correct some of these problems would necessitate legislative amendments but of the type which will not result in establishing other "roadblocks" for this choice reform.

The other side of this discussion involves school district problems that result as charter schools evolve. Once more it represents a money flow problem. A school district's budget is based on the proposed number of students and other factors as presented in information available during budget review time. However, in September and October, overwhelming changes in student population occur, especially in urban centers where transience is quite problematic. Population shifts result in teacher-student classroom shifts. Since charter school students leave the district school in disproportionate

grade amounts, it is likewise difficult for the school district to determine teacher load, class size, split-classes in elementary schools, and over-or under-enrolled courses in the high school. These problems translate into financial problems as well since school districts attempt to follow state mandates and contractual agreements in settling organizational patterns. This delicate balancing act at the beginning of every year in school districts argues well for a re-examination of timely funding to public school districts and direct funding to charter schools. During the time of "settlement" in student population, most districts are not forwarding charter funds therefore leaving the latter in unfair dire straits financially. News critic David Boldt cited this problem among others but believes the district's stance toward its approved charter schools is despicable; he noted:

> The school district has become increasingly artful in shorting charter schools. Even though the district's own budget increases annually, the amount it gives the charter schools has gone down in each of the three years they've been in existence. That takes a sharp pencil. (Inquirer, 2/25/00).

Another problem area that dwells in this discussion is accountability, a construct that exists in two main areas: student achievement and fiscal practice. Accountability problems have not yet totally surfaced since charter schools have approximately three to five years to demonstrate good student achievement and sound fiscal accounting. Fortunately, non-profits such as the ***Charter School Project*** (Duquesne University) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Drexel University) provide assistance in both of these areas. The results of a question survey of both urban and suburban charters in Pennsylvania two years ago revealed that most CAO's had not begun to develop measurements to assess student ability nor fiscal audits; it was really too early in the process...the main goal was to be operational, a time-consuming project which required "all hands on deck" for twenty-four hour periods. Now that most charters are "up and running well", CAO's and their charter constituents are engaged in utilizing pre- and -post student examinations and curriculum-based tests from external consultant

agencies. They are also examining the alignment of their curriculum with the annual PA State Student Assessment (PSSA), the student scores of which will serve as a major predictor for charter status renewal.

Other expensive components of charter school existence are providing for insurance, leasing facilities, obtaining school-based services for maintenance, etc. These are costly items since charter schools must cover facility costs from their operating budget; no capital budget funds are available. Major problems in facilities and maintenance decrease the funds allotted for enhanced classroom activities and computers. Some school districts do permit charters to share services by leasing these from the school district or by allowing students to participate in special classes such as Advanced Placement Chemistry, or extra curricular activities which include sports, music, and other related arts groups without paying additional fees. However, this is not the case overall and many charter school administrators and parents are voicing their objections to paying additional fees for charter student engagement in class or extra-curricular activities since both schools are supported by public tax dollars. In coping with this problem, many charter schools have developed cooperatives for accessing leased services; these collaborative structures assist in better use of charter funds.

The latent establishment of an Appeals Board as set forth in the legislation is perceived as a non-supportive element in this reform effort. It was to be implemented two full years after the date of approved charter legislation. It was argued in previous papers that this board could have been instituted much earlier; its latent inception is viewed as an attempt to discourage district approval of an unforeseen large number of charters. However, when the Appeals Board was created, charter applicants faced numerous unanticipated barriers and experienced even greater disappointment as their proposals were not approved (Inquirer, 7/99). Besides the issue of appropriate funding streams being a concern of operational charters, application for review and approval of charter proposals has become the second

most daunting factor for those in quest of charter status. In addition, the appeals process in Pennsylvania is quite costly representative of another item that serves to discourage applicants and "cap" the number of approved charters.

PROBLEM-SOLVING ARENAS

One of the most outstanding indicators of reform movement sustainability is the vigor with which a group of constituents collaborate to withstand the hardships acting as blockades to success. The type of spirit which emits from charter collegiality has become a "bulwark in the storm". In any organizational setting, it is the excellence of leadership that is an attribute to success. There is no need to look further than at charter school Chief Administrative Officers to find outstanding exemplars of educational leadership because during their short servitude they have experienced overburdening situations and overcome unforeseen obstacles. June Hairston-Brown depicted CAO"s in her recent presentation at the 2000 Charter School Conference "...they are real estate agent, attorney, educational leader, conflict resolution personnel", and assume a host of other roles when the situation requires it. Another presenter at the 2000 Charter Conference), Don Shavely, current Superintendent of the San Carlos School District which includes a charter school, offered several recommendations that appear to assist in maintaining charters as a viable educational reform well into this new century. He cited that fact that in many cases, school districts openly provided charter support but were actively engaging in "back-stabbing" activities using interpretations of the charter school law in that state. This feigned support hardly surprises charter proponents since there is an awareness of the rationale for school district resistance. On the other hand, some districts have viewed the advantages and benefits of charter status and are vigorously converting all their schools.

Don Shavely decided to become involved in school choice; he believed that competition will foster academic growth and development. California's legislation is quite flexible as portrayed by Dr. Shavely (4/2000) in the following classifications.

Charter schools may exist as combinations:

Dependent	Independent
Site Based	Virtual
Directly Funded (from state)	Indirect Funding (from district)
No Collective Bargaining	Collective Bargaining
For-Profit Status	Non-Profit Status
Start-up	Converted

Shavely presents an example of the change charter status may offer public education. Within a five year period, the San Carlos Charter School was recognized as a California Distinguished School; with a student population of 200 and a wait list of 120, it received the highest ranking in the state. He noted that district superintendents can be proactive in taking advantage of charter concepts by replicating successful practices in district schools and developing connections between district and charter schools. Shavely desired the San Carols School District to be a model for other districts and in 1992 he established the following criteria for success: schools were to be innovative, accountable, selected by choice, and competitive. He also believes that charters should start small and expand as successful operations permit. The existence of charters create opportunities for comparisons and entrepreneurship and therefore can assume a catalyst role of improving district schools.

In portraying the key components of a successful charter, Shavely recommends the following features:

Research in developing the site	Technology Emphasis
Experimental	CAO as Resource Choreographer
Performance Pay (staff sets own goals)	Multi-age Instruction
New Governance Structure	360 degree evaluative structure
Visiting Professionals	5/4 Organizational Schedule*

*(Students attend 5 days/ teachers attend seminars 1 day replaced by visiting professionals)

Shavely views charter schools representative of a shift from government monopoly to choice and more freedom. He advocates that superintendents should be more proactive rather than reactive in connecting district and charter schools for their mutual benefit. He perceives charters as currently behaving like a 'marketplace'; advertisements are sent to other districts, parents also assume a comprehensive marketing role, administrators, teachers, and governance teams engage in writing business plans and applications for grants. These are the activities of a new horizon for school-community involvement!

A FEW SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

It is amazing that given the multitude of roadblocks to successful charter school establishment nationwide, most have survived well with minimal casualties. Accountability, one of the prime concerns, is multi-faceted; it depicts a wide array of activities that basically include student performance and sound fiscal practices. Most charter schools are concerned with the type of measurements to be selected by the state and the approving school district. If only student scores are elected, those charters that cater to a an alternative school student population, most of whom have been previously incarcerated, would be unfairly disadvantaged. A proposed use of several different types of criteria would represent a fairer approach to assessment utilizing a reasonable time frame as well. Since charter renewals are based on accountability factors, it is hoped that both the state and associated school districts will consider multiple measurements for student performance and charter school viability.

In regard to this problem, some educators recommend charter school use of school based competency assessments in addition to statewide testing programs. Employing pre- and -post tests will establish base-line data to demonstrate growth of student academic ability. The following ideas are offered by Chris Nelson, a professor of Public Law and Politics at Mid-western University (4/2000).

School Self-Assessments: these are performed by staff, students, and parents. It is a documentation of student performance, financial accountability, fulfillment of mission depicting the degree to which student needs are served, etc.

Advertise Best Practices: this can be accomplished by developing a web-site depicting successful programs, events, and school activities

School Culture Assessments: schools need to set their own expectation for their constituency which decides the type of documentation to use to portray school growth.

Establish Milestone Indicators: these assist in moving the charter school toward it goals

Use of Good Communication Strategies: utilize the Free Press Release Model - devise and release information in advance; this helps define and influence indicators by relating to public and school constituents what the information really means. Therefore, the charter school can discuss what they will do as a result of the assessment findings.

Since different stakeholders have different perspectives, the best way to approach this strategy is to analyze what is meaningful to the school district, then establish an accountability program. In addition, it is wise to examine how internal and external stakeholders view progress. Accountability is a two-way street; list criteria for contract renewal and negotiate it with the school district. It is also recommended that CAO's, as the policy public official, 'work out' an accountability program with the district in advance of charter school implementation.

Many new start-ups encounter difficulty dealing with the local school district to gain charter status approval. Recommendations in this scenario consist of building relationships between school districts and charter school applicants. The underlying question guiding this inquiry constitutes "does the state allow sufficient flexibility for both the school district and charters to experience "win-win" situations? What are the barriers inhibiting agreements? What can be done to make school districts more amenable to charter schools.

First of all, the old adage that in order to create change, it is important to offer something to a disinterested party that serves their purpose or is of interest to them. In this vein, it is essential to

determine what factors are important to a specific school district, since each case is different. The following suggestions offered by Brian Hassel offers some possibilities:

- **Exchange learning activities**: the charter school can be viewed as an experimental program that in turn can offer "Best Practices" to the district for replication. Charters can become laboratories for developing different learning activities.
- **Charters can pilot innovative pedagogical practice**: these can be shared with the district
- **Charters can be laboratories** for new forms of accountability, contracts, and service delivery.
- **Charters can relieve district overcrowding** by providing additional space and alleviate the necessity of major district capital building investments.

These represent a few of the strategies that assist in improving district-charter school relationships. It is unfortunate that the prime factor for adversarial relations hinges on funding issues that can be addressed through changes in legislation. The aforementioned strategies of collaboration to access essential services, utilizing assistance from Foundations and other technical help agencies, and designing multiple factors for school accountability all represent sound ways of maintaining an effective school program which meets the needs of its students and school constituency. And last but not least consists of the support of public officials such as Congressman Bob Brady, who awarded $250,000 to the Alliance Progress School in North Philadelphia, as part of a grant program.

SUSTAINABILITY DEPENDS ON THE STRENGTH OF THE VISION

As mentioned at the outset, one of the prime factors responsible for charter school sustainability resides in the strength of the vision of its constituents. Charter schools have been making progress despite attempts to curtail the growth and development of this school reform. All the indicators delineated in this paper attest to positive advancement. The use of collective efforts among groups of charters to attain necessities will serve these schools well in the future. The fact that there are 1,000

applicants for 720 spaces at the ***Mathematics, Civics, and Science Center***, newly established by educational community activist Veronica Joyner in Philadelphia, demonstrates the public's support of this reform initiative. Continued engagement in the development of the community will likewise add to their support base. One of the most outstanding features of charter schools is in their establishment of new partnerships with community organizations, agencies, business corporations, and local universities. In addition, the degree of parent involvement is a significant factor in creating success; this is bolstered by a high degree of excitement among all charter school participants as they work toward using a different pathway to implement a quality education for our students.

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